A GREAT LOVE

BY DOROTHY CANFIELD

THE SECOND OF A SERIES OF FIVE EXCURSIONS ALONG THE BYWAYS OF HUMAN NATURE

WHEN my pretty little cousin and goddaughter, Flossie, fell in love with Peter Carr, we all felt rather apprehensive about her future. But Flossie faced the facts with an honest, even a rather grim, resolution which surprised us. She said, with only a little tremor in her voice, that she never expected entirely to occupy the place in Peter's heart which Eleanor Arling had taken forever, but that she loved him so much she was willing to take whatever he could give her. It wasn't his fault, she said, with the quaintest chivalric defiance of us, if poor Peter hadn't more to give. She thought "a great love like that was a noble thing in any one's life, even if it did make them perfectly miserable." "If Miss Arling felt that happiness must be sacrificed for her art, why that was a great, exalted attitude to take, and Peter's sorrow was sacred in her eyes," and so on and so forth.

So they were married, with the understanding that Peter could still go on worshiping the very sound of Eleanor Arling's name and turning white when he came across a mention of her or of her pictures in the cabled news of the art world in Paris. Flossie was, as my brother said, a good sport if there ever was one, and she stuck gamely to her bargain. She had transferred the big silver-framed photograph of Miss Arling from Peter's bachelor quarters to the wall of the new living-room and she dusted it as conscientiously as she did the Botticelli "Spring" which I gave her for a wedding present. It was not easy for her. I have seen her flush deeply and set her lips hard as Peter looked up at the great brooding dark eyes shadowed by the casque of heavy black braids. Flossie is one of the small, quick, humming-bird women, with nothing to set against Miss Arling's massive classic beauty, and by her expressions at such moments I know that she felt this bitterly. But she never let Peter see how she felt. She had taken him, the darkness of his unrequited passion heavy on him, and if she ever regretted it she gave no sign.

She flashed about the house, keeping it in perfect order, feeding Peter with most delicious meals, and after the twins came caring for them with no strain or nervous tension, with only a bright, thankful, steady enjoyment of them that was warm on your heart like sunshine. Peter enjoyed his pretty home and devoted wife and lively babies and excellent food. He began to lay on flesh and to lose the haggard leanness which, just after Miss Arling had gone away, had made people turn and look after him in the street. Architecture is, even when you are busy and successful as Peter is, a rather sedentary occupation, offering no resistance to such cooking as Flossie turned out. Peter's skin began to grow rosy and sleek, his hair from being rough and bristling began to look smooth and glossy. It was quite beautiful hair as long as it lasted, but as the years went on and the twins began to be big children it, unlike the rest of Peter, began to look thinner. Peter with a bald spot was queer enough, but before he was thirty-five it was not a spot, but all the top of his head. We thought it very becoming to him, as it gave him a beneficent, thoughtful, kindly look, like a philosopher. And his added weight was also distinctly an improvement to his looks.

Flossie had not changed an atom. Those tiny, slight women occasionally remain stationary in looks, as though they were in cold storage. She continued to worship Peter, and as he had made a good husband we were not surprised, although of course you never can understand what an excessively devoted wife sees in her husband year after year. Flossie never mitigated in the least the extremity of her attention to Peter's needs. When he was called away on a business trip, she always saw that his satchel was packed with just what he would need; and she would have risen from her grave to arrange his coffee in the morning exactly to his taste.

The rest of us had forgotten all about Miss Arling's connection with Peter, and had grown so used to the photograph of the big handsome woman that we did not see it any more. Then one morning when I came downstairs I found Flossie waiting for me, very pale, with dark circles under her eyes. She was holding a newspaper in her clenched hand—the New York newspaper they took on account of its full gossipy "World of Art" column. Flossie opened it to that column now, and read in a dry voice: "'American art lovers are promised a treat in the visit of the famous Eleanor Arling, who arrives on the Mauretania. Miss Arling plans an extensive trip in her native country, from which she has been absent for many years. She will visit New York, Pittsburgh, Chicago, Denver, and San Francisco. Her keen artistic perception and memory is shown by her intention of breaking her trip for a few days at—'" Flossie's voice broke. "She's coming *here*," she gasped, then, collecting herself, she continued reading: "'Miss Arling told our interviewer that she once passed some weeks there and remembers with pleasure a composition of cliff, water, and pine trees. She wishes to see it again.' Cliff, water, and pine trees," repeated Flossie. Her eyes were blazing. "Of course *we* know it is nothing in the way of a landscape she is coming back to see here!" I saw that her little fists were clenched. "I won't stand it," she cried, "I won't stand it!" But she looked horribly frightened, all the same.

"What can you do?" I asked, sympathizing painfully with the poor little thing.

"I shall go to see her the minute she reaches town."

"What can you *do?*" I asked again.

"I don't know. I don't know. Whatever I have to do to make her go away and not take Peter," she said, wildly, and went away.

Ten days after this she darted in, her face pinched, and told me that the time was now, and that she wanted me to be with her. "I must have *somebody* there," she said piteously.

I was thoroughly alarmed, protested, but found myself in Flossie's high-powered car, driving at a dangerous rate of speed towards Miss Arling's hotel.

We were shown into the sitting-room of her suite, and sat down, both breathing hard. I am very fond of Flossie, and I was very sorry for her, but I certainly wished her at the other end of the world just then.

Presently the door opened, and a stout middle-aged woman came in, her gray hair bobbed and hanging in strings around a very red, glistening face. It was terribly hot, and she had, I suppose, just come in from the long motor trip there. She had a lighted cigarette in one hand. Her cushiony, shapeless feet were thrust into a pair of Japanese sandals. She distinctly waddled as she walked. We supposed that she was Miss Arling's companion, and I said, because Flossie was too agitated to speak, "We wished to speak to Miss Arling, please."

"I am Miss Arling," she said, casually. "Won't you sit down?"

I don't know what I did, but I heard Flossie give a hysteric little squeak like a terrified rabbit. So I hurried on, saying the first things that came into my mind, desperately: "We heard you were coming—in the newspapers. We are old residents here—a cliff, water, and pine trees—I know the view—we thought perhaps we might show you where—"

She was surprised a little at my incoherence and Flossie's strange face, but evidently she was a much-experienced woman of the world whom nothing could surprise very much. "Oh, that's very kind," she said, civilly, tossing her cigarette butt away and folding her large, strong, fat hands on her ample knees, "but I went that way on the road coming in. I remembered it perfectly. I used it as the background in a portrait some years ago."

She saw no reason for expanding on the topic and now stopped speaking. I could think of nothing more to say.

There was a profound silence. Then our hostess, evidently taking us for tongue-tied country people, went on making conversation with a vague, fluent, somewhat absent-minded kindness. "It's very pleasant to be here again. I stayed here once a few weeks, many years ago, when I was young. We had quite a jolly time. I remember then there was a boy here—perhaps a young man—a slim, dark, tall fellow, with the most perfect early Renaissance head imaginable, quite like the 'Jeune Homme Inconnu.' I've been trying all day to remember his name. Paul? No. Walter? It had two syllables, it seems to me. Well, at any rate, he had two great beauties—the pale, flat white of his skin and his great shaggy mass of dark hair. I've often used his hair in drawings since. But I don't suppose he looks like that now." Flossie spoke. She spoke with the effect of a revolver discharging a bullet. "Oh, yes, he does! He looks exactly like that still, only more mature, more interesting," she said in an angry, defiant tone.

"Ah, indeed," said the painter, with an accent of polite acquiescence. She sighed now, and looked at the clock. I rose, and said, since we could not be of use to her, we would leave her to rest.

She accompanied us to the door pleasantly enough, with the professional, impersonal courtesy of a celebrity.

Outside Flossie sprang to her car, leaving me stranded on the sidewalk. She looked furiously angry. "I must get Peter away!" she said between her teeth.

"But not now, surely!" I cried.

"Now more than ever," she flung back at me as she whirled the car around.

Then, as I stood open-mouthed, utterly at a loss, she drove the car close to the curb and, leaning to my ear, whispered fiercely, "You don't suppose I'll let her see how he looks *now!*"

Miss Arling was gone before they returned from the two-day fishing trip on which they started that night. I doubt if Peter ever heard that she had been in town.

The morning after their return, as soon as Peter had gone downtown, Flossie tore down the big photograph from the wall and flung it into the garbage-can.

I noticed its absence, some days later, when I went over to see them, and asked, with a little apprehension, "What did Peter say when he found it gone?"

The strangest expression came into her face. She said in a low tone, "He has never even missed it," and then she began to cry. As I looked at her I saw that she had suddenly begun to show her age.